



## After a While You Just Get Used to It: A Tale of Family Clutter

By Gwendolyn Knapp



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**A vibrant new voice ups the self-deprecating memoir ante with tragicomic tales of her dysfunctional life in swampland Florida and America's Big Easy**

A dive bar palm reader who calls herself the Disco Queen Taiwan; a slumlord with a penis-of-the-day LISTSERV; and Betty, the middle-aged Tales of the Cocktail volunteer who soils her pants on a party bus and is dealt with in the worst possible way. These are just a few of the unforgettable characters who populate Gwendolyn Knapp's hilarious and heartbreaking—yet ultimately uplifting—memoir debut, *After a While You Just Get Used to It*.

Growing up in a dying breed of eccentric Florida crackers, Knapp thought she had it rough—what with her pack rat mother, Margie; her aunt Susie, who has fewer teeth than prison stays; and Margie's bipolar boyfriend, John. But not long after Knapp moves to New Orleans, Margie packs up her House of Hoarders and follows along. As if Knapp weren't struggling enough to keep herself afloat, working odd jobs and trying to find love while suffering from irritable bowel syndrome, the thirty-year-old realizes that she's never going to escape her family's unendingly dysfunctional drama.

Knapp honed her writing chops and distinctive Southern Gothic-humor style writing short pieces and participating in the renowned reading series Literary Death Match. Now, like bestselling authors Jenny Lawson, Laurie Notaro, and Julie Klausner before her, Knapp bares her sad and twisted life for readers everywhere to enjoy.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“This true story is like the best craziest-good novel you ever read. Knapp's natural talent wraps advanced techniques of fiction and creative nonfiction into a big bang of story-telling. Miss this one and you miss an exploding universe of family goodies.”

—**Clyde Edgerton**, author of *Raney* and *Papadaddy's Book For New Fathers*

“A funny, slightly disturbing, wistful read that could only happen in the South. If you grew up below the Mason-Dixon line, this book will make you nostalgic for the South, its eccentrics, and reunions that include a cooler of beer, someone getting out of jail, and an itchy dog.”

—**Adele Levine**, author of *Run, Don't Walk*

“Despite a life as hectic as a hurricane, and at times as foreboding as a Florida swamp, Gwendolyn Knapp's *After A While You Get Used To It* is a hilarious, insightful reminder of what the best memoirs can offer, imposing a sense of order and much-needed catharsis on the chaos of life.”

– **Josh Hanagarne**, author of *The World's Strongest Librarian*

“Gwendolynn Knapp may not be the hoarder her mother is, but lucky for us readers she has been hoarding sidesplittingly hilarious stories about bad family holidays, bad boyfriends, and bad bowels and unloads them all in her romp-of-a-read memoir. To open her book is to unpack a warehouse full of laughter.”

—**Jamie Brickhouse**, author of *Dangerous When Wet: A Memoir*

“Wielding a twisted wit and incisive eloquence, Knapp forges her way to adulthood through the suffocation of stuff. Deliciously rich prose and tart turns of phrase make the John Waters-esque characters of her life real on the page, in the end creating a coffee-stained ink-splattered dog-eared love letter to her family and the scruffy little packrat in all of us.”

—**Shawna Kenney**, author of *I Was a Teenage Dominatrix*

“I love this book. I love it. In one paragraph, I'm laughing my ass off; the next, I'm audibly shocked, saying, “Ohmygod, did that really just happen?”; and the next, I'm knocked off my seat by moments so poetic and profound they take my breath away. Knapp is a wonderful craftswoman; each essay builds on the next to paint her growing up and growing into this wild, beautiful dysfunction, and at the heart of it all is a love so enormous it seeps off the pages. Here is what it means to be a family. Here is what it means to be alive.”

—**Megan Stielstra**, author of *Once I Was Cool*

“Gwendolyn Knapp's writing manages to be both darkly acerbic and incredibly warm — reading her memoir, I found myself cycling back and forth between cackling and covering my mouth in puritanical shock. *After A While You Just Get Used To It* perfectly captures the relentless, crazy-making love only possible (and endurable) among family.”

—**Katie Heaney**, author of *Never Have I Ever*

“I've long believed that someone would eventually write a book about what it's like to grow up as a normal person in normal old Florida — a state filled with earnest, lighthearted folks who each and every day strive to bring a little sunshine into the lives of others. This is not that book.”

—Wayne Curtis, author of *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in 10 Cocktails*

About the Author

**Gwendolyn Knapp** holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina. Her fiction has appeared in *Crazyhorse* and *Quarterly West*, and her nonfiction has appeared in *The Southeast Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Best Creative Nonfiction Vol. 2*, and *Narrative.ly*. She also had a notable essay mention in *The Best American Essays 2013*. Knapp lives in New Orleans, where her mother also relocated in 2010, along with tons of her junk.

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**Prologue: Family Clutter**

There had been others, in the early days after Mom's divorce, men who looked like Magnum, P.I., and carted us around in their midlife-crisis-mobiles. This was back when most guys liked to wear the least amount of shorts possible to show off the greatest amount of body hair possible: the mid-1980s. I'd witnessed the worst of it from the backseat of cars driven by dudes who never stuck around. Dating, I'd learned by the time I was nine, was full of embarrassment and let down. Not for kids, but for the single parent. Mainly, I'd learned, it was a means to see who would stick around after Mom started yelling. By the time she was in her second year of architecture school in Tampa, two months deep into the fall semester, she'd found a new victim.

Molly and I knew right away. We found Mom in the bathroom one Saturday acting all nutsy: applying a home perm, trying on a new shade of rouge, and singing Linda Ronstadt into the mirror at the top of her lungs, locking us out, though I was about to soil my pants.

"I can't hold it any longer," I told her.

"Well, that's nothing new," she said, waltzing out with her silk kimono draped over her thin shoulders.

"What's wrong with you?" Molly asked Mom, but we already knew. Soon she would have her good pair of suede boots on, pretending she didn't count screaming as a hobby.

"Nothing." She smiled. "Can't I just be happy if I feel like it?"

On Saturdays, she usually liked to wallow in bed until noon, warning us to keep it down with our WCW impersonations and suffocation-by-pillow competition. Then she'd rise like the dead in her frilly cotton nightgown, downing a pot of black-tar coffee and slumping over her drafting table for hours. We thought that was her happy.

"I've met someone," she told us, buffing her nails, sharpening them perhaps, a deranged twinkle in her eye.

"You should go lie back down," I insisted.

"Yeah," Molly said. "You got a new Spiegel catalog in the mail."

That was the spirit. A healthy dose of perfect models in clothes you couldn't afford was a sure way to bring any single mother back to her normal state, but Mom wasn't having it.

"His name is John," she continued. She said this as if *John* were the most exotic name ever spoken.

"John," I said, and yawned. I couldn't help it. If pronounced in German, *John* basically was *yawn*.

When John swung into our side yard that evening at fifty miles an hour, screeching to a halt next to our rusted wagon, it was no surprise Mom still wasn't ready to go. My mother ran late for everything, always had. There never was a chorus recital, movie, living Christmas tree, or Easter pageant we'd ever seen the first thirty minutes of. The story of Jesus, for me, had always begun with the wino years. Some people blame repeated tardiness on selfishness and just plain being rude, but there were things working against Mom. She had a hard time getting out of bed due to the stresses of life—no child support, two nagging daughters, graduate school, an ailing father.

My sister and I sat on the back steps and watched as John emerged from the ugliest car I'd ever seen, uglier than our own even, a turd-boat on wheels with one ill-fitting, sickly green driver's-side door. It opened with several loud pops, like bones being ripped from their sockets.

John was a good-looking guy with a head of dirty-blond hair and an overgrown mustache, wearing aviators and denim on denim, smiling at us with perfect white teeth. He wasn't perfect though. He was from Ohio. Land of corn and white bread. We were from here, Florida, land of lightning and man- grove swamps, and could detect interlopers as easy as red ants in the sugar sand.

"Nice car," my sister said under her breath as we watched John try to slam the green door shut three times. He leaned all his weight against it and gave it a big bump with his hip like I'd seen some fat, drunk bridesmaids do to each other at a cousin's wedding over the summer, knocking the baby's breath out of each other's hair during "Disco Duck."

"Thing's broke," John said, instead of introducing himself. "I had these guys at a body shop fix it and they screwed me over. Story of my life."

He spoke to us like we were his drinking buddies, at nine and twelve years old. He took one look at our skeletal plum trees, our inflatable kiddie pool folded in on itself like a yard omelet, and said, "Sure is a nice place you got here."

"Isn't it?" we said, showing off the tarp-covered junk and a pile of wood where a playhouse used to be before the neighbor kids burned it down.

"No, it's really nice. It's real old Florida," he said, and smiled.

I'd heard that before. *Real old Florida* meant overgrown and mysterious. It meant unpaved and unlike the rest of Holiday, Florida, with its strip malls and developments. It meant cow patties, and rotten oranges, and septic tanks that occasionally flooded the yard. It meant oak trees draped in shawls of moss as if they transformed into elderly women at the stroke of midnight.

Usually when people came over, their eyes bulged in fear of the house, wrapped in vines and giant spiderwebs. John walked around with his eyes bulging in wonder, claiming, "They don't make beauties like this nowadays." Rubbing his hands on the siding and concluding, "Why, I bet that's lead paint."

"Taste it and tell us," Molly said.

It was obvious Mom and John already had one thing in common: the ability to stand and stare at a building long enough to drive any normal person insane. Mom had been hauling us across the state every weekend for a year to visit private universities, skyscrapers, and other so-called structures of architectural

merit that she wanted to study and sketch. Where I saw various buildings with no public restrooms or trees and hard benches that hurt my tailbone while I writhed around with boredom, she enthusiastically commended concrete slabs for their clean lines and postmodernism. For studying so many aspects of architectural design, she certainly didn't apply them to our own house, besides creating new walls out of stacks of baskets and magazines. When we moved into Aunt Ruby's old cracker house three years before, we never moved any of her things out. We just stacked our things on top as if preserving some avant historical movement: "Southern hoarder trapped in haunted house" chic.

"Enter," we said to John.

Mom, of course, wasn't done in the bathroom. Give that woman a day, and she could spend it scrutinizing every hair, pore, and new development with her body. Give her a date, and she'd need to be locked in there overnight.

"Your date is here," Molly screamed.

"Yeah," I said. "*Your date* is here."

"Just a second," she said.

We showed John our ancient piano that poured out dust like a steam engine when you played chopsticks too fast, our sewing machine underneath mounds of fabric, our bookshelves and the bookshelves behind them. Aunt Ruby hadn't lived here in a while, not after she kept wandering into the woods and the men in our family had to come out and capture her like she was a wild animal. Found her sitting on a stump in the forest, asking them if they'd come by for iced tea. *No, ma'am*, they said, *we come to take you to Anclote Manor*. But all her things were preserved under our own. Coming from a place like Palm Beach, where we'd lived with enough space for our things in a sixties-style ranch house until our parents split up in 1986, was not only culture shock for Molly and me but also an electric shock if you attempted to plug certain lamps into certain sockets.

"Look at these Caboodles," we instructed John, but he paid no mind.

"Why, get a load of these window moldings."

He had us cornered in the living room, lecturing us on the difference between craftsman and shotgun houses, when Mom emerged from the bathroom, resplendent and dewy. She could turn it on when she wanted to; she had the ability to become somebody different with makeup and an outfit alone. She was so beautiful then, so fluffy haired, so stinking with the toxic combination of Elizabeth Arden Red Door and perm chemicals that I could no longer detect the smell of the decaying animal in the wall or the years of fried-chicken grease emitted by the kitchen, where the wallpaper had begun to unpeel itself in rebellion.

"Is the perfume too much?" Mom asked. "I can't tell."

"No, it's great," John said, a clear indication he had indeed tasted the paint.

I applied my Dr Pepper lip gloss and pulled on my deflated Nike Airs, watching Mom give John a hug before saying her world-famous line, "Well, excuse our junk."

Certainly if you went back in time and researched our family crest, it would read *Lord, bless this mess*. But

John didn't mind our junk. He felt comfortable with it, excited even.

"You have a lot of cool stuff," he said. "This place is great."

She smiled, and I knew it was over then. We'd be stuck with these two loonies forever, listening to them talk about the joys of accordion doors and carpet samples. Molly sulked and wrapped herself up in a baggy sweater, loathing her existence like every middle-school student who'd ever been forced to come out of their bedroom. By *bedroom* I mean the square foot of living space she had carved out in the front junk room.

"Well, where are we going?" I asked. At least we usually got a free meal out of the deal.

"We?" Mom laughed. "Oh, no, honey. You're getting dropped off at Grandma and Grandpa's. John and I are going dancing."

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Cheryl Dawkins:**

Information is provisions for individuals to get better life, information these days can get by anyone with everywhere. The information can be a know-how or any news even a huge concern. What people must be consider when those information which is in the former life are hard to be find than now could be taking seriously which one works to believe or which one the particular resource are convinced. If you find the unstable resource then you get it as your main information we will see huge disadvantage for you. All of those possibilities will not happen with you if you take After a While You Just Get Used to It: A Tale of Family Clutter as the daily resource information.

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